

GUEST COLUMN

Shame on Fox Theatre's board

By **A. Stephen Cucich**

While the days of a gold retirement watch have long passed, nothing more clearly shows the collapse of corporate integrity and gratitude than the Fox Theatre's decision to violate its lifetime contract with Joe Patten, the theater's long-standing savior and stalwart.

Patten is generally regarded as the man who twice saved the Fox – once from the wrecking ball in the 1970s and again in 1996 from an early morning fire that would not have been so promptly contained had Patten not been in residency and alerted firefighters to it.

Now, the theater's board of directors has canceled its earlier agreement and issued Patten a new lease, which could lead to his expulsion from his guaranteed living quarters on the theater's upper floors above Ponce de Leon Avenue.

Throughout his more than three decades of service to the theater, Patten was largely responsible for overseeing the rehabilitation of the dilapidated property and engaging in its massive fund-raising campaign, resulting in the building's restoration to landmark status. Today, the Fox has become one of the country's most celebrated and heavily used show places.

Beyond that, it was Patten, the Renaissance man, who personally restored the theater's mighty Möller organ and who worked hand-in-glove with the team of historic preservationists to make certain that the aesthetics of the facility were restored tastefully and with fidelity to their original design and character.

In exchange for these valuable services, Patten was awarded a permanent contract by the board of directors, guaranteeing that he would have lifelong on-site living accommodations. The document included a covenant that the lease could be terminated by a two-thirds vote from the board.

This caveat was included to protect the property in the unlikely event that he should commit a felony or otherwise bring embarrassment on the institution. Such caveats are typical for persons who receive lifetime appointments or permanently beneficial arrangements.

Now that Patten is older and the theater's success has made the property more valuable, the board has used that clause to claw back his space, claiming Patten's dwindling health as its rationale. In an effort to appease the ensuing public outrage, the theater continues to protest that it has offered Patten a new contract, but it is so crowded with onerous restrictions and untenable conditions that it is clearly calculated to assure Patten's expulsion.

Amid all of the drama of Monday night's board meeting, even though the theater was well represented by two attorneys, Patten was deprived of his legal representation, and his attorney was literally escorted from the proceedings by the theater's privately hired police officer.

It is ironic that the arts are conceptually about humanism and compassion. We look to our institutions for this sort of leadership. What has the Fox shown us here? How to kick an old man to the curb.

When our cultural institutions turn callous, it's normally the invention of a single person who is a man of esteem and stature and who is able to machinate broad support. So, to lift a line from "King Lear," "The Prince of darkness is a gentleman." He should hang his head in shame.

Finally, the Fox Theatre is one of the world's most venerable show places and it deserves our community's continued and enthusiastic support. Its board of directors, however, has chosen a blind and tone deaf path in creating this unnecessary and unprovoked issue. It needs to reverse itself immediately, apologetically and without prejudice.

A. Stephen Cucich is an arts publicist and marketing strategist who worked with the Fox Theatre during its restoration in the 1970s.